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Basilio Huertas Entryway Design-Build Project

Celeste Hershey

When my partner Betty Densamo and I took on this project at the beginning of the year, we knew it was bigger than anything we'd done before. We were excited to do things outside of our normal studio coursework but we knew that would come with new challenges. Our studios hadn't prepared us for the problems we've faced over the course of the year. We haven't handled everything perfectly and we've fallen short of the initial goals that we'd set, but we've kept working and haven't given up. Now we have real-world experience to build on as we graduate and plunge into the responsibilities of life after college. We'll have a better idea of what to do (or what not to do) the next time we're in over our heads.

The two of us have different career plans and we came to the project from different backgrounds. One thing that we share, besides our architecture education, is a desire to serve our neighbors with our gifts and talents. We'd been serving our fellow students and going away on service and mission trips but we didn't want to keep ignoring the needs that were right next door in South Bethlehem. Since we only had a vague idea of what those needs were, we started meeting with people and doing some research.

When we met with Seth Moglen, the director of the South Side Initiative, he was full of enthusiasm and suggestions for what we could do. One of his ideas was especially exciting; he told us about the Lehigh Valley Hispanic Center and how they'd expressed a need for a better entryway for the Basilio Huertas Senior Center on 4th Street. He connected us with the people in charge: Damaris Torres, the program coordinator, and Lorna, the executive director.

At our first meeting, Lorna and Damaris told us about the main needs of the center. One thing they've been wanting for a while is seating for the seniors who need to wait for the bus every day. The other main problem is that the brick senior center building is very non-descript and easy for



Figure 1: The Hispanic Center Buildings

both pedestrians and drivers to miss. The WIC building with the stone facade is easier to notice but the house that they've converted into office spaces blends in with all the houses around it.

The site doesn't look like a unified whole and it doesn't attract attention to itself. Newcomers have had trouble finding it even when they have the address and people who can use the services they provide might walk by every day without knowing what's available. The ideal design for the entrance area would provide comfortable seating, while also creating a visual connection to unite the buildings and make the Hispanic Center more noticeable.

After meeting with Lorna and Damaris we were eager to get started. We took measurements of the site and created a 3D SketchUp model. We spent the fall semester acquiring funding and brainstorming designs. We ate lunch with the seniors several times to start getting to know them. We showed our designs to various professors for feedback and got plenty of helpful advice. We had a general idea of what we wanted to do: some benches along the sidewalk, some self-watering planters full of bright flowers, and an archway to draw attention to the main entrance at the top of the ramp.



Figure 2: Our SketchUp Model

Everything was going smoothly until we started trying to land on a design. We had plenty of ideas, but we couldn't find anything we were really excited about moving forward with. The people at the senior center were happy with what we were coming up with, but we

weren't satisfied with it ourselves. When we were confident enough in a design to take it to professors for feedback, they'd point out ways that it wasn't going to work or remind us of important features that we'd missed. Often the advice would conflict with what other people had told us and it was up to us to decide whom we were going to listen to. This was a big change from our studios, where we had one professor that we needed to please if we wanted to do well. We were starting to fall behind schedule but we still hadn't been able to find a design we could be comfortable with.

With studio projects, the end result is a nice-looking set of drawings. Often the emphasis is on exploring an interesting idea, not in creating something realistic and practical. For the first time, we were creating designs for physical objects; designs that we were going to build ourselves. We needed to think about details that we'd generally been able to ignore in the past. How will we avoid water damage? How can we minimize the risk of theft? What materials and finishes can we use that will be low-maintenance but that won't look cheap? How can we incorporate armrests and other ergonomic features so that the seniors will be able to sit down and get up safely? We had never had to consider these aspects of the design before and we struggled to incorporate them in an elegant, appealing way.

Another big struggle was context. We hear it all the time as architecture students: a successful design fits appropriately into the world around it; it's not enough to make it look pretty for your portfolio. In our case we wanted our design to fit into the physical context of 4th St. without looking out of place and we also wanted it to reflect the cultural context. That's where things got tricky because we had to figure out what that would actually look like.

From the beginning, we were wary about imposing a design based solely on our own aesthetic. We wanted to give the seniors something that they would find attractive, not weird. We wanted to listen carefully to our clients and learn to see from their perspective, but we weren't sure what questions to ask.

We also wanted to take inspiration from Hispanic culture, but we didn't want to create a shallow mimicry. We wanted to find deep and meaningful connections so that we could give the seniors something that they would be comfortable with. On the other hand, Damaris had said that they wanted to be sure that everyone would feel welcome at the senior center, regardless of their cultural background. We needed to figure out a way to incorporate the cultural context without alienating anyone.



Figure 3: Inspiring Color

was color; we started seeing a pattern of vivid pinks, blues, oranges and yellows. We also kept noticing intricate textures and swirling patterns. We pinned up a collage of these images in our workspace to help us keep them in the backs of our minds.

At the beginning of the spring semester, we compiled a list of intangible ideas that we were hoping to incorporate into our design, drawing from our prior research into weatherproofing, ergonomics, culture, and so on. The challenge was to figure out what those ideas could look like in tangible form, but everything we could come up with fell short in a myriad of ways. We knew we needed to improve on our initial ideas but we didn't know how. We kept getting stuck but we needed to move forward somehow.

Since we continued to have trouble developing our ideas, we decided to try some hands-on experimentation to see if that would spark anything. For a while we had been looking up information about concrete as a building material. Concrete tends to have bleak, boring associations, but it has so much potential to form interesting and unusual shapes. We started thinking about the possibility of using fabric as formwork to create concrete forms with billows and wrinkles and other exciting textures. We were also looking online and discovering some methods of adding color to the concrete. We got some basic supplies and spent a month pouring concrete into as many shapes as we could think of. We started to get a pretty good idea of what we could do with concrete and how to make it behave the way we wanted it to.

The possibilities were really endless, but we used two main methods for the framework. For some samples, we draped relatively flat sheets of fabric over square wooden frames and let the weight of the concrete stretch the fabric in various ways. By adding tucks and strings and so

To do this, we spent a few mornings at the senior center sitting and talking with the seniors. The language barrier was a challenge and we had trouble knowing what to say, but we were able to experience the welcoming atmosphere and see what the senior center provides. We also did look through photos of past trips to Latin America as well as Puerto Rican artwork and compared notes to see which elements had inspired us. A big one

on, we could influence the final shape. We also made samples by sewing tubes and bags in various shapes, to create more sculptural pieces. We liked these better because they work better on their own; the other samples seem more like panels; they have a definite back to them that you don't want to see.



Figure 4: Concrete Samples

Along with the shape, we also experimented with color and texture. We tried different ways of adding pigment to create swirls and marbled effects. We liked the idea of integrated colorant. It doesn't require maintenance because it doesn't wear off. Each type of fabric we used left behind a different texture; sometimes we'd end up with fuzzy concrete because some of the fibers would get trapped in the cement. Our personal favorite was the surface we got when we used sheets of heavy-duty plastic tarp. It was so unexpectedly smooth that it was a lot of fun to touch. Finally, we found some brocade-like upholstery fabric that left behind a subtle floral

pattern, as well as some lace. When we combined the lace with the colorant, we got some really beautiful effects. We were really excited about the possibilities of creating objects with textures and colors that you wouldn't normally expect from concrete.

So after we'd done this for a few weeks, we decided to see how we could take what we'd learned and apply it to a final design. We've got vibrant color; we've got texture. We've got the potential for some really interesting curves. But how should we put all of this together into a functional seat or planter or arch? We were still running into trouble. Every design we came up with seemed like a kludge. We were sticking all these different components together, but nothing was coming to life. We had pages and pages of sketches and half-baked ideas but we just kept getting stuck trying to shape them into a workable plan. We were running out of time to build, too.

Another stumbling block for us was trying to work together. We'd come up with designs individually and show them to each other and share our thoughts. Unfortunately it seemed like whenever one of us would be particularly excited about a design, the other would have too many reservations. We knew we were going to have to compromise, but we didn't want to move forward if one of us was unhappy with the plan. That was another thing that kept us in limbo for so long.

So there we were about a month ago with time running out and still no design. We needed a detailed design so we could buy supplies, apply for permits and start building. We had definitely not expected it to take so long. We'd known for a while that we'd probably be better off just picking something and going with it. But that didn't make it any easier to pick! It felt like we were going nowhere.

Our solution was to split up responsibility over the components with Celeste working on the benches and planters, and Betty focusing on the gateway area. That worked well in helping us make decisions, although it was not the way we'd hoped to do it at first. Betty decided to eliminate the gateway altogether, replacing it with an avenue of colorful flags that was inspired by her visit to Rosarito, Mexico. We liked the way the fluttering of the flags would direct attention to the main entrance. Celeste found a solution to the problem of incorporating armrests gracefully by switching to individual chairs instead of benches. We took inspiration from the idea of a front porch; it seemed to do a good job of combining the welcoming, comfortable aspects we were looking for and it certainly fit the context of 4th St.



Figure 5: Front-Porch Inspired Design

Finally, we had landed on a design that accomplished what we were hoping to do and was manageable to build. We printed out some colorful renderings of our designs and showed them to Lorna and Damaris, explaining our reasoning about how welcoming and homelike this scheme would be. They were very quick to tell us they thought we had done a beautiful job.

Lorna said she would love a design like that for her front porch or backyard. But they graciously pointed out that we'd missed an important aspect of their needs. "We already have a very welcoming atmosphere," she said. "What we need right now is to be taken seriously as an organization. People look at us and see a random assortment of mismatched buildings with a hodge-podge of second-hand furniture. We need to demonstrate to our donors and potential donors that we mean business, and that's hard when everything is so casual." She pulled out one of the very first images we'd shown her. "This design is great; it's very professional-looking. We'd love it if you could give us this." The other staff in the room gave their agreement. They assured us that they liked all of our designs, but the first one was the best for their needs.

This was a complete surprise, although in hindsight it made perfect sense. We apologized to Lorna for the confusion, and let her know we'd go with the preferred design but that we'd need to work out the details. On the way back, we laughed and groaned about the

irony. The design that they wanted, that was so suited to what they needed, was something we'd whipped up in about twenty minutes just to give them an idea of where we were planning to put things. We'd used simple, generic benches and sketched out a simple sunburst gate inspired by their logo, and called it good enough. We had proceeded to spend the next six months trying to come up with a perfect design, only to realize that what we'd done way back in October was the closest to what they really needed. So much for going in with an open mind and listening well and trying to avoid imposing our own assumptions and design aesthetic! We had to laugh at the ridiculousness of the decision, but we also had a lot of work in front of us.

We took a step back to figure out how to make the most out of the time we had left. We still had a lot of details to work out, but at least we could be confident that we were going in the right direction. And we had learned an important life lesson! (Not that we don't still have a long way to go in our journey of learning how to communicate effectively with clients.) We realized that since the benches they wanted were so generic, it made more sense for us to purchase ready-made benches so that we'd have more time to focus on making beautiful self-watering planters, an elegant spiked archway, and bright, lively flags.

We went back to the drawing board with our SketchUp model and started working out the construction details so that we had something we knew how to build. We started stocking up on supplies we knew we'd need, running into some logistical difficulty when it came to finding people with cars big enough to pick up 200 board feet of wood. We realized that it wasn't going



Figure 6: Our Revised Design

to be possible to build everything before graduation, so Celeste has started looking into the possibility of staying on campus over the summer to finish the actual building. We decided to go forward with what we could in the meantime, and bought materials for the flagpoles so that we could make a sample to test our ideas of how to construct it. We still haven't reached the stage in our design where we're ready to apply for permits; that's something that will have to wait for the summer.

It's been a challenge to stay optimistic in the face of these setbacks, and it's been tough making decisions about things that we have so little experience with, since it's so hard to predict the results of those decisions. As we look back on everything we have been able to do, however, we're able to see all the things we've learned about creating a design and bringing it to fruition.

We haven't lived up to our original goals, plans and schedules, but we have lived up to our hopes of learning through hands-on experience the kinds of things that our studios have not taught us. We're grateful for what this experience has taught us and we're looking forward to the chance to apply what we've learned to future projects.